

INTEREST REPRESENTATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

"A HISTORY OF THE CIVIL SERVICE ASSOCIATION"

by Dr. Harold Lutchman, reviewed by Dr. Robert Moore

Civil servants are rejoicing in three things at the moment: enhanced prestige in a society which sets increasing store on administrative skills; bargaining strength in a society in which political power can only be tempered by trade union pressure; and back pay in which all men whatever their profession have ever been known to rejoice.

Their mood is optimistic about the future and their commitment to the present Government is clear. As they look back over the last thirteen years or so, they are satisfied that they and their Association have played a noticeable part in public events. Diligent anonymity which is supposed to be the ideal of the British civil servant has not been the lot of their Guyanese counterparts. They have had colourful publicity and maximum exposure. Naturally, they want this recorded, for men who feel that they have done much usually want a record of their doings; especially when they can conveniently peg that history on a fortieth anniversary as the Civil Service Association will be able to do early in August 1973.

The Civil Service Association therefore cast around for someone to write their record. He had to possess a rare combination of three qualities: a sense of history which would prevent him from seeing the past as merely a reflection of the present; a sense of balance which would state the issues with detachment and not merely write an apologia for the Association; and a sense of trade union practice as

well as of politics which would enable him to master the intricacies of resolutions, amendments, counter-amendments and all the strategy of pressure without boring himself or his readers.

The C.S.A. has found a man in Dr. Harold Lutchman and we have now got his book which records the history of the Civil Service Association from its birth in 1923.

The story of the Association begins in a period when society was so remarkably different from what it is now that Dr. Lutchman with an eye on the younger leadership has quite rightly stepped aside for a while to etch its main features. Guyana in 1923 was a despotism of sugar tempered by rum; and one of those imperial outposts which Colonial Governors regarded as a necessary purgatory before promotion. Its three main characteristics were malaria which kept the population small; social snobbery which kept the upper classes dull; and alcoholic apathy which kept everybody drunk.

But things were beginning to happen. The first World War had provided a slight boom for the sugar industry and so a little more money to the Colony. But the war was followed by rising prices and falling profits and Civil Servants with fixed pay felt the pinch most. Although the founders of the Civil Service Association stated their aims in high minded terms - to improve the quality of the members and their service to the public as well as to confirm their loyalty to the Administration - the truth was that there were two forces prodding them to combine for their own protection. The first was the financial insecurity of the times and the second was the imperial government's view that when money



was short government servants ought to be the first to cheerfully make sacrifices in the public interest. It was to ensure that the sacrifices civil servants had to make did not reduce them to an order of paid martyrs that the civil servants saw the need for a pressure group, which were totally loyal to the empire's ideals would also serve the interest of the empire's local servants.

As Dr. Lutchman points out, there was no question among civil servants in those days and even through the 1930's as to their imperial loyalty. The Empire was not only a fact, it was something of a religion and the civil servants of British Guiana like those in the rest of the Caribbean, regarded themselves if not always as high priests, at least as important acolytes of the shrine.

It is not difficult for a civil servant to be loyal because up to the middle 1940's they usually came from those classes of society in which loyalty to the Sovereign was part of their mother's milk. The Civil Service was virtually a closed shop: an applicant had to have "the right background" which meant that if he were white his credentials were impeccable; if he were mulatto his credentials were smudged but adequate; if he were black he would have to belong to a small group of black family which had established a reputation for knowing their manners and knowing their place; and if he were Indian he was generally regarded as more suitable for those professions in which one's wits are more useful than one's integrity. In short, a birth certificate

announcing proper pedigree was better than a School Certificate announcing proper performance.

For a long time the high prestige of the Service compensated for the little pay of the civil servants, and applicants often worked for a year on no-pay probation in order to qualify for entry - which of course successfully eliminated those applicants from classes which could not afford to do this. But even civil servants cannot live by prestige alone. It was the need for more pay which originally made the Civil Service Association necessary and the continuing need to revise that pay which made the Civil Service Association possible.

The struggle over salary revisions naturally has dominated a lot of the life of the C.S.A. and Dr. Lutchman gives it due weight. After the second World War the Civil Service became less of a middle class Mafia and was slowly prised open to people with certificates. New elements came in with less respect for the old sanctities and clearly a greater need for more money. And the history of the C.S.A. in the 1950's and 1960's has been one continual pressure on government to pace the salary scale with the cost of living. This culminated in the Civil Service Association's strike against government in 1962 which because it was bracketed with the T.U.C. strike against the



Kaldor budget, set the C.S.A. and Dr. Jagan's government on the road to ultimate collision. Dr. Lutchman faces these developments with balance and detachment, not always praising the C.S.A. and not always blaming the government.

But the book is not merely a history of struggles for more pay; it would be a tedious document if it were. There is a central theme running through it which gives it a unity satisfying to the reader and which explodes two myths: the first the grand belief in the neutrality of the Civil Service and the second a non-political nature of the Civil Service Association.

Dr. Lutchman makes it abundantly clear that he does not believe that a Civil Service in a Colonial territory or a developing independent country can be really impartial. In other words, the British model of a Civil Service pure and undefiled by politics - if it does exist - is not for export.

His analysis is very persuasive. In the old Colonial days of the 1920's when his study begins the chief civil servants were initiators of government policy, their functions were really what we would now call Ministerial and since there was no question of an alternative administration there was no need for impartiality. But although their

functions were essentially political they disliked the word "politics", and despised politicians whom they regarded as rogues wanting to use the public purse for private purposes. (In fact one of the interesting side issues of Dr. Lutchman's book is the way in which in the last forty years the politician has been transformed from a Satan to a Saviour).

The local civil servants took a similar view of their role. Their job was to keep the populace in order and they disciplined rather than served the public. There was a knowing props to a trinity of powers: sugar, commerce and empire. Dr. Lutchman contends rightly that these were political positions and civil servants were the dedicated instruments of a particular ideology, though they would not have used that word in those days.

The second World War altered the feelings of many Colonials about the Empire. Its value was increasingly called in question and politica became a desirable means of looking for alternative answers. Equally important, the Royal Commission of 1939 by condemning the abuses against which the early trade unionist had struggled in the 1920's and 30's made trade unions respectable in Guyanese society. By the 1950's therefore the politics of collaboration had given way to the politics of criticism of the Empire.

With young bloods coming into the Civil Service whose school certificates gave them expectations which their salaries frustrated the Civil Service Association acquired more and more a trade union



atmosphere and with new ideas of society in the air civil servants could hardly stand aside from the political arena. The stage was set to test whether the Civil Service Association in the new era could successfully walk the tight rope of putting industrial pressure on government without falling into political activity.

The first test came in 1959 when the C.S.A. took its stand on the issue of Guyanisation of the Public Service by pressuring the Governor of the day to revoke the appointment of an ex-patriate to the Postmaster Generalship and to instal instead Mr. C.W.B. Deane. To win its cause the C.S.A. affiliated itself to the T.U.C. which put the weight of its influence behind it. A compromise solution was reached but the principle of immediate Guyanisation was a political issue with industrial undertones rather than an industrial issue with political overtones, and affiliation to the T.U.C. made the C.S.A. a bed fellow with a body profoundly political in its outlook with some of its leading members as leading politicians.

It was assumed in 1961 when the P.P.P. government was re-elected that Dr. Jagan would take the country to independence. He wanted the full loyalty of the Civil Service not only to his government but to his gospel - the old civil servants had given to the Empire. And many civil servants were prepared to implement his policies without accepting his ideology. But there were equally many who were prepared to do neither. If the Civil servants were in an ambivalent position, the Trades Union Congress was not: it regarded the Jagan government as a threat to its existence and therefore the embarrassment of Dr.

Jagan as the guarantee of its survival. The C.S.A. at this time was fighting the government to secure salary revision and therefore prepared to apply industrial pressure, but being affiliated to the T.U.C. it was being dragged into the efforts of that Body to apply political pressure to the Government. The C.S.A.'s loyalty to the government already under strain because of the latter's ideology was severely tested by the government's cavalier attitude to the question of salary revision. Naturally the C.S.A. looked to the T.U.C. to support its industrial claims whilst the T.U.C. supported the C.S.A. for political ends. The thin dividing line between industrial and political action easily dissolved and as if to make the unity of objectives clearer the C.S.A. joined the T.U.C. in a solidarity march against the celebrated Kaldor budget proposals of February 1962. The Union which had thus begun was consummated a year later when the great general strike took place. Dr. Lutchman demonstrates that by the end of 1962 there were strong elements in the C.S.A. whose attitude to the P.P.P. government was almost identical with that of the members of the T.U.C. In the circumstances the proposed Labour Relations Bill by which the government hoped to give increased power to those unions loyal to itself was interpreted by most civil servants as an evil portent for the future of the Civil Service Association as well as for the Trades Union Congress. It is Dr. Lutchman's argument that if civil servants really believed in the neutrality of their position they would have treated the Labour Relations Bill as part of the legislation which it was their normal duty to implement. But by 1963 it was difficult for them to live by the concept of political neutrality, when



the P.P.P. government itself showed scant respect for it. It was in fact a two-way stream: the government was impatient of a Civil Service not evangelically dedicated to its thinking and the Civil Service was impatient of a government not sufficiently appreciative of its interests and its fears. Given such conditions, collisions were bound to be political and the Labour Relations Bill with the power for displacing certain unions seemed to civil servants to give the Minister of Labour a chance to weaken the C.S.A. Civil servants therefore went on strike in 1963 along with the T.U.C. and a host of other unions for basically political reasons and as the strike grew longer the political objectives became more obvious: to render Dr. Jagan the impotent possessor of government's power.

It is outside the scope of Dr. Lutchman's book to observe that the strike of the civil servants was one of the pivotal factors in the British government's decision to engineer Dr. Jagan from office.

By contrast Dr. Lutchman points to the commitment and enthusiasm with which civil servants and their Association served Mr. Burnham's government, accepting his increasing move to the left without reserve or remorse and not only actively assisting his administration but fervently subscribing to his evolving tenets. And this brings us back to his original thesis: that for a Body like the C. S.A. which by preserving the right to strike is really a trade union, it is virtually impossible to avoid a political role in a society such as ours: a conclusion which may disturb the minds of the older civil servants nurtured in the mythology of the British system but which will not disturb those who have grown up

in this highly political environment - that is, until they get a government whose assumption they do not share.

Dr. Lutchman has written with balance; he has not written with drama. Some may complain that the smell of the gunsmoke is not on his pages as he recounts the conflicts of the early 1960's. But we can leave that to the novelists who I have no doubt will make imaginative reconstructions of the dilemmas of those tumultuous years. His purpose is both more sober and at the same time more important: to analyse the role of a Body like the C. S.A. which lives in two worlds at once, the world of precedent, hierarchy and order and the world of pressure, strategy and combat. Certainly two things are clear, his book will be of use both to those men who want to exert pressure on some institution and to those who want to understand how pressure is exerted. And secondly wherever men discuss the history of the Civil Service Association they will discuss Lutchman.